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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SAN SALVADOR 002374

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KCRM PGOV ES PREL

SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: HOMICIDE RATE RISES TO WARTIME LEVELS

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: In recent months, El Salvador has experienced a significant increase in homicides, straining law enforcement authorities' ability to make arrests and prosecute those responsible. However, polls indicate that Salvadorans do not perceive the rise in killings as a failure of the Saca administration, which continues to take measures to address the problem. END SUMMARY.

HOMICIDE WAVE HEARKENS BACK TO DIFFICULT YEARS

¶12. (U) BACKGROUND: During El Salvador's civil war years (1980-1992), the nation's homicide rate hovered at around 60 per 100,000 population per year. After peaking at double that rate during the mid-1990s, it had slowly decreased to levels of 25-45 murders/100,000/year in recent years--still one of the Western Hemisphere's highest rates. On August 2, the Civilian National Police (PNC) announced that from January through July of this year, some 2,040 homicides were committed in El Salvador, compared with 1,501 for the same period last year. This homicide rate--approximately 10/day--included a violent July that witnessed 375 murders. Should this trend continue, 2005 will have the distinction of having surpassed the wartime rate of killings.

¶13. (U) For January through March of 2005, the Civilian National Police reported 902 homicides nationally, although the Office of the Attorney General (FGR) registered only 807 for the same term. Additionally, the FGR had no figures available outlining how many homicides had resulted in filing of charges; this ongoing lack of coordination between the PNC and FGR significantly hampers efficient arrest and prosecution of criminals.

¶14. (U) July's homicide victims were mostly men aged 19 to 59 living in urban areas; eight of every ten murders were perpetrated with firearms. Deputy PNC Director Pedro Gonzlez estimated that approximately 90 percent of murder victims were gang members, and related that one of the government's assumptions in drafting the "Very Firm Hand" anti-gang initiative was that gang-related violence was the leading cause of homicide. For his part, the FGR's Chief of Criminal Investigation agreed that recent months' homicides were primarily related to gangs, as well as drugs.

NO CONSISTENT INVESTIGATION OR EVIDENTIARY PROCEDURES

¶15. (U) According to the FGR's Chief of Criminal Investigation, only one prosecuting investigator is available at each FGR subregional office at night and over weekends. A PNC investigator outlined that during weekends, when five or more murders often occur each night, only one PNC Technical-Scientific Unit is on duty to collect evidence, which often results in hasty, sloppy work. He added that investigation of homicides in El Salvador is hamstrung by the lack of consistent investigation guidelines.

¶16. (U) Inasmuch as the Constitution stipulates that the FGR shall be responsible for directing criminal investigations, courts often exclude evidence collected by PNC officers without the FGR's authorization and oversight ("Direccionamiento Fiscal"). In the absence of uniform national rules of evidence, this problem is exacerbated by judges' virtual autonomy in deciding the admissibility of evidence; two different judges can--and often do--rule differently on the admissibility of the very same evidence.

¶17. (U) Despite the problems faced by police, polls show that the PNC is the institution in which Salvadorans place their highest confidence. According to a nationwide October 2004 poll by the University of Central America's Institute of Public Opinion (IUDOP), some 77 percent of Salvadorans hold a positive view of the PNC, while only 6.4 percent characterized the PNC as "bad". In striking contrast to citizens' positive perceptions of the police, the nation's judicial system ranks as the nation's least-respected democratic institution, with 37 percent of respondents holding a negative view of the judiciary, and only 38 percent qualifying the courts' work as "good". (Note: According to a February CID-GALLUP poll, seven of every ten Salvadorans identified at least one positive accomplishment resulting from the administration's "Very Firm Hand" anti-gang initiative. End note.)

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE PROBLEM

¶18. (U) A May IUDOP poll revealed that only 3.2 percent of

the population viewed the increase in homicides as a failure of the government. Most Salvadorans were more concerned with economic problems; 37 percent saw the high cost of living as the administration's fault. In August, civil organizations including the Catholic Church and the Salvadoran Foundation for Economic and Social Development (FUSADES) made public statements on the problem of crime; Monsignor Fernando Saenz Lacalle, Archbishop of El Salvador, urged the government and citizens to redouble efforts at deterring the violence El Salvador suffers. FUSADES expressed its concerns to the Minister of Governance, and urged further reforms in firearms law.

CAFTA, ANTI-CRIME EFFORTS, AND UPCOMING ELECTIONS

¶9. (U) On August 14, Minister of Governance Rene Figueroa announced that the government would strengthen evidence collection and homicide investigation, and implement an aggressive plan to arrest more than 150 murder suspects in coming weeks. The plan includes the creation of the new PNC Homicide Investigation Unit (PNC/DIHO), in coordination with the FGR's elite investigation unit. Additionally, 700 soldiers will join 800 already deployed in a joint task force patrolling rural areas, and incarcerated gang leaders will be transferred to the nation's maximum security prison.

¶10. (SBU) COMMENT: Recent passage of CAFTA has raised expectations for improved economic growth, but the nation's critical crime problem is widely viewed as a serious impediment to foreign direct investment. Crime also holds political ramifications. Municipal and Legislative Assembly elections will take place in March 2006; if past experience holds, these elections will serve as a referendum on the ruling party as voters look ahead to the 2009 presidential election. Governance Minister Rene Figueroa, who oversees the PNC, is widely viewed as one of three possible ARENA presidential candidates; lack of progress in addressing the nation's staggering homicide rate could affect the viability of his candidacy. END COMMENT.